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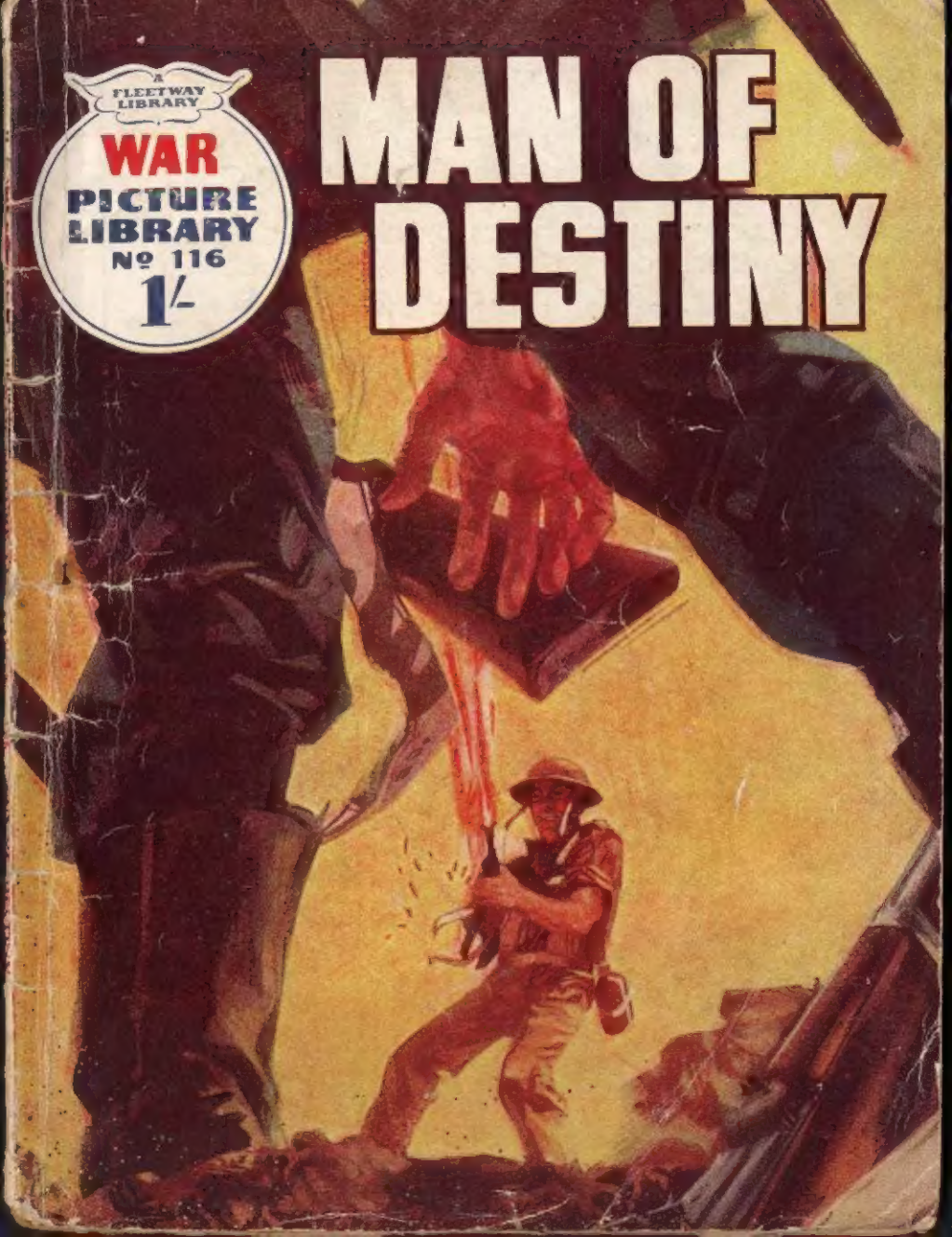
MAN OF DESTINY

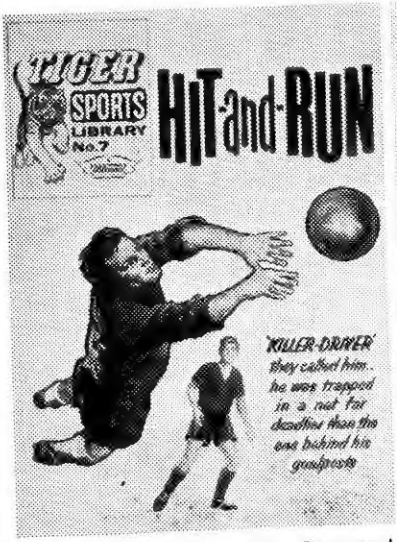


SOCCER ACTION, SOCCER THRILLS . . .

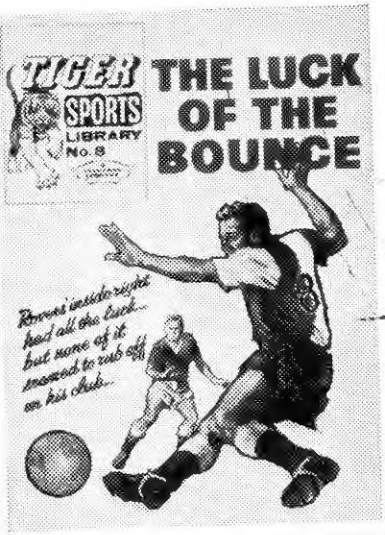
FOLLOW THE FORTUNES OF TWO TRUE-TO-LIFE TEAMS AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE FOOTBALL LADDER OF FAME

ON SALE NOW :—

TIGER SPORTS LIBRARY Nos. 7 and 8



No. 7.—**HIT-AND-RUN.** Suspected of having knocked down a child in his powerful vintage sports car, Carford goalie, Ron Towers, faces a bleak future.



No. 8.—**THE LUCK OF THE BOUNCE.** A new star for the Rovers . . . but the star burns too bright for a small town like Bradmere . . .

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Man of Destiny

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Chapter 1. HOMEWARD BOUND

IT WAS THE GERMAN WEHRMACHT, HURRIEDLY FLUNG INTO POSITION, WHICH DISPUTED THE BRITISH LANDING. THE MEN ON BOTH SIDES WERE VETERANS. THEY FOUGHT VICIOUSLY . . .
FOR THREE YEARS THE ITALIANS, PRODDED BY THEIR FASCIST LEADERS HAD WAGED TEPID WAR ON THE GERMAN SIDE. NOW THE BATTLE WAS ON THEIR OWN DOORSTEP AND THEY SWEATED BETWEEN TWO FIRES . . .
HELP!
SI . . . HELP! BUT TEDESCI OR INGLESE, WHO WILL HELP US NOW?

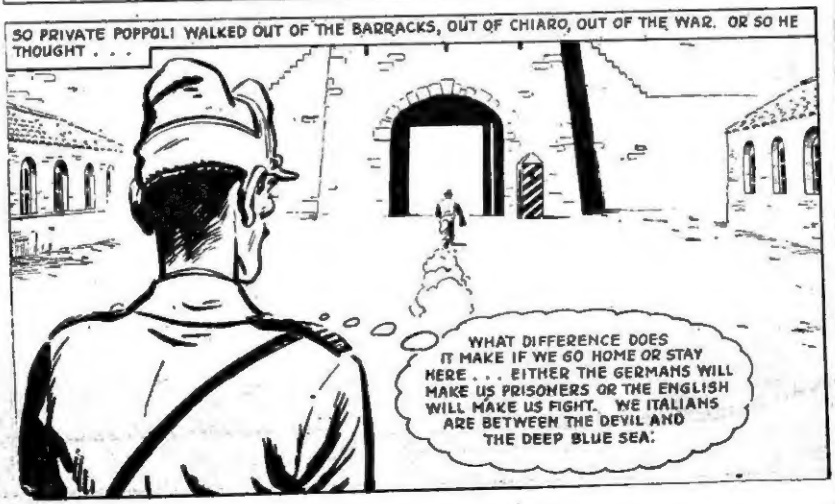
Man Of Destiny

THE NEWS, AND HIS MEN'S DELIGHTED RECEPTION OF IT, DISGUSTED CAPITANO MASTRIANO . . .
ON THE WIRELESS, CAPITANO... THE WAR IS OVER FOR US! THE MARSHAL ORDERS US TO LAY DOWN OUR ARMS!
MIRACOLOSO!
PAH! BUT FOR THIS I WOULD HAVE BUNDLED THE IMPERTINENT INGLESE BACK INTO THE SEA! IT IS LUCKY FOR THEM.
A STRAY SHELL BLEW HOT AIR INTO THE WATCH TOWER. THE BELLIGERENT CAPITANO BEAT A STRATEGIC RETREAT . . . .
HOWEVER, IT IS A SOLDIER'S DUTY TO OBEY ORDERS! STAY HERE, MEN! I SHALL GO BELOW TO . . . TO PUT MY PAPERS IN ORDER!

FOR THREE YEARS OF THE MOST SAVAGE WAR IN HISTORY, THE QUIETEST SPOT IN THE QUIET BACKWATER OF SUNNY CHIARO HAD BEEN CAPITANO MASTRIANO'S REGIMENTAL OFFICE . . . .
AH, POPPOLI! STILL AT YOUR POST! AT LEAST ONE OF MY SOLDIERS SHOWS A SELFLESS DEVOTION TO DUTY!
ONE MOMENT, CAPITANO . . . BOOTS, PAIRS OF, THREE THOUSAND . . . BRUSHES, BOOT, THREE THOUSAND AND THREE . . . BRACES, SEVEN HUNDRED AND TWO . . .
SEP 8 1945
IT WAS THERE, WITH A PEN AND A RUBBER STAMP, THAT PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD FOUGHT HIS WAR . . .
NOISY CHAPS, THE GERMANS, CAPITANO. I SUPPOSE THEY'RE HOLDING MANOEUVRES ON THE BEACH AGAIN. SUCH BANGS . . .
BANGS, PRIVATE POPPOLI? YOU HAVE NOT HEARD? FOR US THE WAR IS OVER. ITALY HAS SURRENDERED AND HER WARRIORS MUST LAY DOWN THEIR ARMS . . .

PRIVATE POPPOLI DID NOT LAY DOWN HIS ARMS. HE CLIPPED THEM IN HIS POCKET . . .
YOU DON'T SAY, CAPITANO . . . SO THE WAR IS OVER . . . WELL, WELL, WELL . . .
PRIVATE POPPOLI STOOD UP BUSILY . . .
POPPOLI . . . WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
TIDYING UP, CAPITANO. I'LL BET MY DESK IN THE TOWN HALL AT CASTELMONTE IS UNTIDY. MARRIAGES, DEATHS AND BIRTHS, THAT WAS ME. THREE YEARS IS A LONG TIME. I'LL BET THEY'LL BE GLAD WHEN I GET BACK . . .
PRIVATE POPPOLI PICKED UP HIS ATTACHE CASE . . .
POPPOLI . . . WHAT ARE YOU PACKING?
JUST A SLICE OF SALAMI, CAPITANO, AND A BIT OF COLD MACARONI AND A COUPLE OF GHERKINS. WALKING MAKES A CHAP HUNGRY. WELL . . . I THINK THAT'S ALL . . .

HIS CAP ON HIS HEAD, HIS ATTACHE CASE IN HIS HAND, PRIVATE POPPOLI STARTED FOR THE DOOR . . .
POPPOLI . . . WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
HOME, CAPITANO! WHERE ELSE? THE WAR IS OVER, YOU SAID SO YOURSELF . . .


SO PRIVATE POPPOLI WALKED OUT OF THE BARRACKS, OUT OF CHIARO, OUT OF THE WAR. OR SO HE THOUGHT . . .
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE IF WE GO HOME OR STAY HERE . . . EITHER THE GERMANS WILL MAKE US PRISONERS OR THE ENGLISH WILL MAKE US FIGHT. WE ITALIANS ARE BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA.

PRIVATE POPPOLI, TROTTING NORTHWARDS, DID NOT THINK ABOUT DEVILS OR DEEP BLUE SEAS. HE THOUGHT HAPPILY ABOUT CASTELMONTE. HE THOUGHT ABOUT HIS DESK IN THE TOWN HALL THERE.

FINALLY HE THOUGHT ABOUT SALAMI. HE HAD COVERED FIVE MILES AND HE HAD TWO HUNDRED AND NINETY FIVE MILES TO GO, BUT THE SUN WAS HOT AND HE WAS HUNGRY . . .
AH . . . ONE OF THOSE LITTLE HILLOCKS WILL DO! SUCH A LOVELY DAY FOR EATING IN THE OPEN. I MUST SAY, PEACE IS VERY NICE . . .

HE WAS EATING A GHERKIN, HIS BACK AGAINST THE HILLOCK, WHEN A CLOUD OF DUST CAME BOWLING ALONG THE ROAD FROM CHIARO. HE WATCHED IT APPROACH WITHOUT ALARM . .
WELL, WELL, SOLDIERS... THEY DON'T LOOK LIKE GERMANS, BUT I EXPECT THEY ARE... ALWAYS IN SUCH A HURRY!
THE VEHICLES WERE ACTUALLY BRITISH JEEPS OF THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE. THEY HAD BEACHED NORTH OF THE MAIN LANDINGS AT CHIARO AND WERE PROBING THE GERMAN DEFENCES INLAND . . .
SHALL WE PICK THE EYTIE UP AND GRILL HIM, CAPTAIN?
NO, LEAVE HIM ALONE, CHAPS. LET HIM ENJOY HIS LUNCH. THE LITTLE MAN LOOKS SO PEACEFUL...

PRIVATE POPPOLI DID LOOK PEACEFUL. HE FELT PEACEFUL. BUT IT WAS THE LAST TIME HE WOULD FIND ANY PEACE FOR EIGHT MONTHS ON THE LONG ROAD HOME.
THAT'S FUNNY... THE TREE TRUNK'S MOVING
THE HILLOCK BY WHICH PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD EATEN HIS LUNCH WAS THE TURRET OF A CUNNINGLY-CAMOUFLAGED GERMAN PANTHER TANK. THE 'TREE TRUNK' WAS ITS GUN. THE GUN WENT OFF VERY LOUDLY BESIDE PRIVATE POPPOLI'S EAR

THE AMBUSH HAD BEEN NEATLY STAGED. IT WAS NOT ONLY PRIVATE POPPOLI WHO HAD BEEN FOOLED BY THE CAMOUFLAGED TANKS.
HOLY SMOKE.. PANTHERS!
FOOT DOWN, DRIVER...TURN ONE EIGHTY!

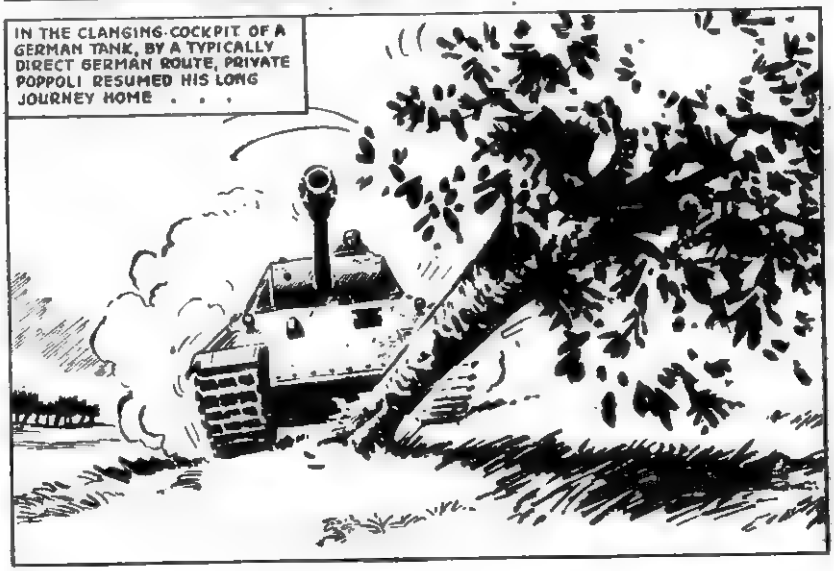
TWO JEEPS HAD BEEN HIT. THE OTHER TWO MADE A FAST U-TURN WHICH TOOK THE GERMAN GUNNERS BY SURPRISE. THEY ACCELERATED BACK ALONG THE ROAD, TOMMY GUNS SPITTING DEFIANCE . . .
CLIMB ABOARD, MEN . . . BOUNCE LEAD OFF THE BLIGHTERS, THE REST OF YOU!
I WONDER WHAT HAPPENED TO THAT LITTLE EYTIE, SIR?

IN ALL HIS THREE YEARS OF WAR, THE LOUDEST NOISE PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD HEARD WAS THE SCRATCHING OF HIS PEN. NOW ALL HELL WAS HUMMING ABOUT HIS EARS . . .
MAMMA MIA!
THE STEEL HATCH OF THE NEAREST PANTHER CLANGED OPEN AS THE TWO BRITISH JEEPS WITHDREW AT HIGH SPEED. A SQUARE BLOND HEAD APPEARED IN THE TURRET . . . .
CEASE FIRE! THE BRITISH SCUTTLE AWAY! LET US HOPE THEY HAVE LEARNED THEIR LESSON!

MAJOR KURT BERG, OF THE SIXTH PANZER DIVISION, WAS IN A GOOD HUMOUR. HIS VOICE WAS AS SOFT AS A BLUNT STEEL FILE . . .
SO! THE ITALIAN WHO ACTED AS OUR DECOY! GET UP, LITTLE MAN. I WISH TO THANK YOU!

PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD EXPERIENCED THREE AND A HALF MINUTES OF THE SHOOTING WAR. IT WAS QUITE ENOUGH FOR HIM...
AH, BUT I INSIST, LITTLE MAN. AND TO SHOW MY GRATITUDE, I SHALL ALLOW YOU TO GUIDE MY UNIT TO CASTROVELLERI . . . INSTEAD OF BEING SHOT!
THE GENERAL IS KIND . . . WHERE'S MY ATTACHE CASE? BUT THERE'S REALLY NO NEED TO THANK ME . . .

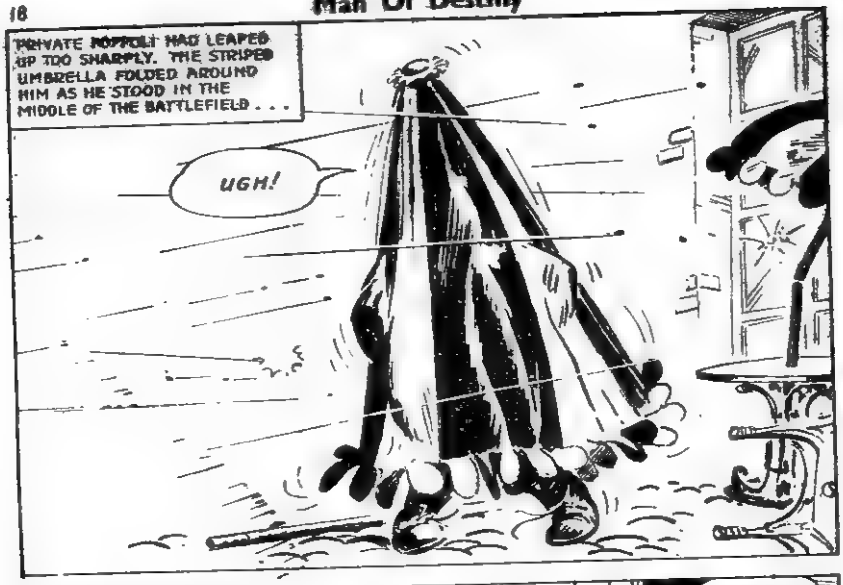
SIX FEET OF MILITARY MUSCLE EXPANDED MENACINGLY OVER THE LITTLE ITALIAN PRIVATE . . .
BUT, GENERAL . . . I'M A NEUTRAL . . . IT'S YOUR WAR, NOT MINE . . . SURELY YOU KNOW . . .
I KNOW THAT YOU ARE A MISERABLE SHIRKER, ITALIAN . . . LIKE ALL YOUR COUNTRYMEN! TO ME, YOU ARE A PRISONER WHO EITHER OBEYS OR DIES! WHICH IS IT TO BE, EH?

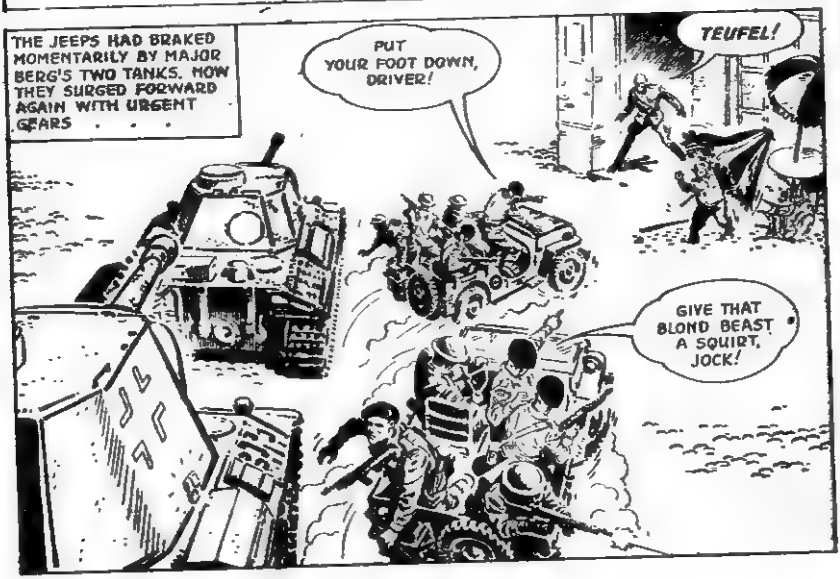

IN THE CLANGING COCKPIT OF A GERMAN TANK, BY A TYPICALLY DIRECT GERMAN ROUTE, PRIVATE POPPOLI RESUMED HIS LONG JOURNEY HOME . . .

Chapter 2: BETWEEN TWO FIRES

SUDDENLY, TWO BRITISH JEEPS EXPLODED INTO THE MAIN SQUARE OF CASTROVELLERI AND A GERMAN SCHMEISSER TORE THE AIR APART TWO INCHES FROM PRIVATE POPPOLI'S EAR . . . . .
TALLY-HO, TROOPS!
HIMMEL . . . ENGLANDERS!

THE JEEPS WERE THE TWO SURVIVORS OF THE AMBUSH ON THE CHIARO ROAD EARLIER. THE S.A.S. MEN HAD BEEN TRAILING MAJOR BERG'S TANKS FOR AN HOUR ACROSS COUNTRY. NOW THEY STRUCK . . .
HAVE THOSE LIMPETS READY, CHAPS! PULL ALONGSIDE, DRIVER!
THERE'S THAT LITTLE EYTIE THE JERRIES CAPTURED, CAPTAIN!
RE DE I VI


PRIVATE NOPOLI HAD LEAPED UP TOO SHARPLY. THE STRIPED UMBRELLA FOLDED AROUND HIM AS HE STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BATTLEFIELD . . .
UGH!


THE JEEPS HAD BRAKED MOMENTARILY BY MAJOR BERG'S TWO TANKS. NOW THEY SURGED FORWARD AGAIN WITH URGENT GEARS . . .
PUT YOUR FOOT DOWN, DRIVER!
TEUFEL!
GIVE THAT BLOND BEAST A SQUIRT, JOCK!

MAJOR BERG DUCKED HASTILY AS THE BULLETS HOSED AT HIM.
CLIMB ABOARD, TONIO . . .
BETTER GET A MOVE ON, CAPTAIN . . . THAT WAS A SIXTY-SECOND FUSE WE USED . . .

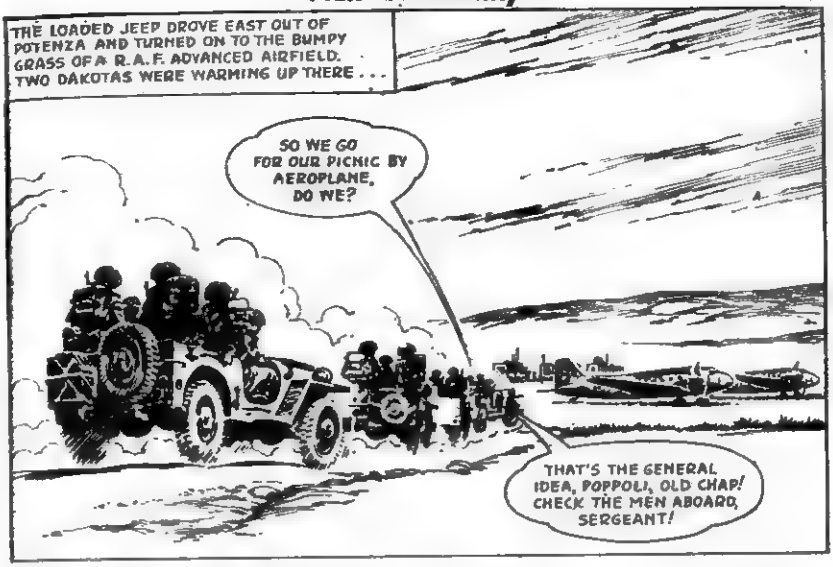
THE TWO JEEPS WERE ROARING OUT OF THE SQUARE BEFORE MOST OF THE GERMANS HAD FITTED CLIPS TO THEIR GUNS. MAJOR BERG SENT ONE ANGRY BUT FUTILE BULLET AFTER THEM . . . . . .
THE ENGLISH ARE MADMEN! THEY PLAY GAMES!
LET'S GO SERGEANT!

DEAFENED, SHAKEN, BEWILDERED, PRIVATE POPPOLI UNSCREWED HIS EYES . . .
YOU ARE THE INGLESE THOSE GERMANS SHELLED ON THE ROAD . . . YOU DIDN'T COME ALL THIS WAY FOR ME, DID YOU?
NO, OLD CHAP . . . NOT EXACTLY . . .
S.A.S.
CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY LOOKED BACK IN TIME TO SEE HIS LIMPET BOMBS WRECK THE TWO GERMAN TANKS. HIS MOUSTACHE TWITCHED APPRECIATIVELY . . .
WE COULDN'T LET JERRY TAKE THE FIRST ROUND AND GET AWAY WITH IT, COULD WE, CHAPS?
MAMMA MIA . . .
SIX MILES BACK TOWARDS CHIARO, THE JEEPS TURNED OFF THE ROAD AND BUMPED INTO A ROCKY GULLY. THE REST OF CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY'S SPECIAL AIR SERVICE UNIT WERE LEAGUERED THERE . . .
WELL, GENERAL . . . ARRIVEDERCI . . . I'M WALKING HOME! IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME . . .
WOULDN'T HEAR OF IT, OLD CHAP! YOU CAN'T JUST POTTER OFF NOW . . . YOU'LL MISS ALL THE FUN!

ON HIS FIRST DAY OF PEACE, PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS BEGINNING TO LEARN ABOUT WAR . . .
FUN? BUT WAR IS A BUSINESS, GENERAL . .
NONSENSE, OLD CHAP . . . WHAT PINHEAD TOLD YOU THAT? WAR IS A LARK . . . YOU HANG AROUND WITH US AND WE'LL SHOW YOU . . .
SAS

PRIVATE POPPOLI HUNG AROUND WITH THE S.A.S. UNIT. HE HAD NO CHOICE. ONE DAY, TWO WEEKS LATER . . .
AH, POPPOLI OLD CHAP . . . SORRY WE'VE BEEN GIVING YOU SUCH A DULL TIME LATELY, BUT I'VE GOT NEWS FOR YOU. WE'RE MAKING A BIG PUSH NORTHWARDS AND YOU'RE COMING WITH US AS A GUIDE.
NORTHWARDS, GENERAL . . . MIRACOLOSO . . . BUT THERE WON'T BE ANY TROUBLE, WILL THERE?

CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY'S UNIT WAS QUARTERED IN A FARMHOUSE AT POTENZA. PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD BEEN GIVEN A HARMLESS JOB IN COMPANY HEADQUARTERS.
TROUBLE? OF COURSE NOT, OLD CHAP! IT'LL BE A PICNIC!
PICNIC . . . AH! BUONO . . PICNICS ARE NICE . . . . I HOPE THE WEATHER'S GOOD!
THE PROSPECT OF A MOVE NEARER TO HIS HOME TOWN AND A PLEASANT OUTING DELIGHTED THE LITTLE ITALIAN PRIVATE. NEXT DAY HE LINED UP WITH THE S.A.S MEN AND WAS GIVEN A RATION PACK . . .
. . . AND THE NEXT . .
AH, A CUSHION FOR SITTING ON AT THE PICNIC! THE GROUND'S SURE TO BE DAMP . . HOW THOUGHTFUL THE ENGLISH ARE!


THE LOADED JEEP DROVE EAST OUT OF POTENZA AND TURNED ON TO THE BUMPY GRASS OF A R.A.F. ADVANCED AIRFIELD. TWO DAKOTAS WERE WARMING UP THERE . . .
SO WE GO FOR OUR PICNIC BY AEROPLANE, DO WE?
THAT'S THE GENERAL IDEA, POPPOLI, OLD CHAP! CHECK THE MEN ABOARD, SERGEANT!

SOMEONE HAD STRAPPED THE BULKY PACK TO PRIVATE POPPOLI'S BACK BEFORE HE BOARDED THE DAKOTA. IT MADE A REALLY COMFORTABLE CUSHION. HE WAS QUITE EXCITED . . .
THIS IS BETTER THAN WALKING . . . YOU WAIT TILL I TELL THEM AT HOME ABOUT THIS ENGLISH PICNIC.
COR, I TAKE BACK ALL I SAID ABOUT THE EYTIES . . . HE'S ACTUALLY ENJOYING THIS TRIP, THE LITTLE GEEZER!

THE DAKOTAS HEADED DUE NORTH. TWO HOURS AFTER TAKE-OFF, CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY GLANCED AT THE WINKING RED LIGHT AND GOT UP COOLLY . . . . .
ALL RIGHT, SERGEANT . . . TIME TO MOVE!
AH, WE'RE GOING DOWN FOR OUR PICNIC NOW, ARE WE, GENERAL?
GOING DOWN? YEAH . . . WELL, YOU COULD CALL IT THAT!

PRIVATE POPPOLI TOOK HIS PLACE IN THE LINE OF SILENT S.A.S. MEN. THE LINE SHORTENED EVERY TEN SECONDS. A LITTLE GREEN LIGHT KEPT FLASHING ON OVER THE OPEN DOOR IN THE FUSELAGE . . .
ALL SET, POPPOLI?
SI, GENERAL! THE AEROPLANE LANDED SO GENTLY I COULD SWEAR WE ARE STILL IN THE AIR!

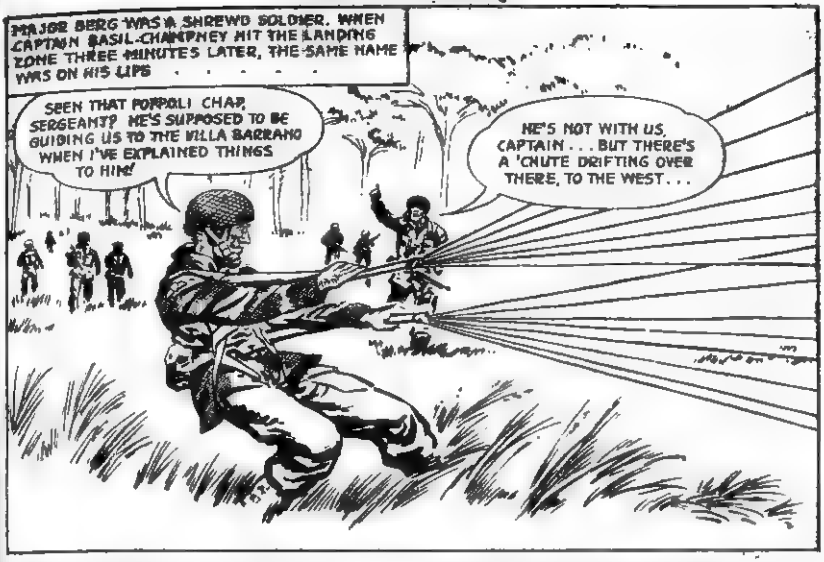
PRIVATE POPPOLI REACHED THE OPEN DOOR IN THE FUSELAGE. HE LOOKED OUT. HE GROANED . . . . . .
OHHH . . .

A LARGE HAND PROPELLED PRIVATE POPPOLI INTO TEN THOUSAND FEET OF STOMACH-LURCHING EMPTINESS . . . . .
EEEHHH . . .

THE LITTLE ITALIAN PLUMMETED EARTHWARDS. HE WAS ON HIS WAY HOME AGAIN, BUT FAST . . .
OOOHHH . . .

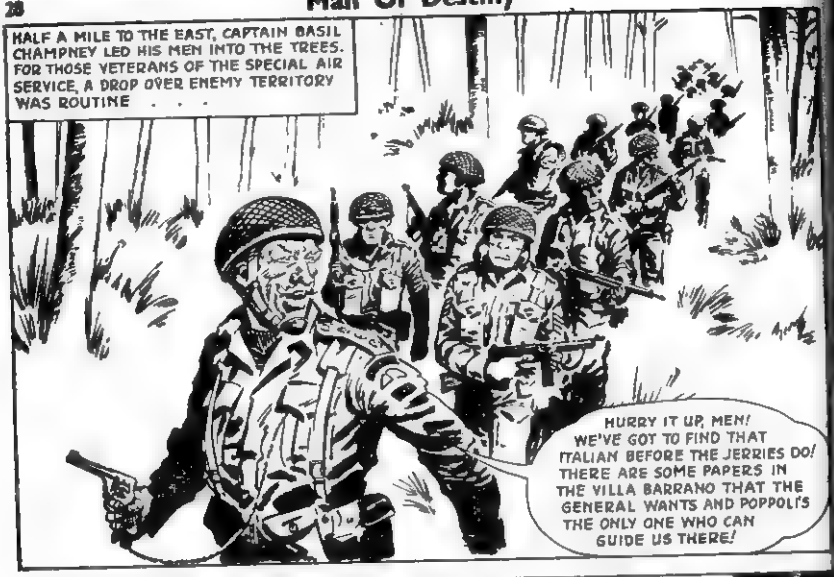
TWO HUNDRED FEET AND A LIFETIME LATER, HIS PARACHUTE OPENED WITH A SNAP. HE SWUNG GENTLY ON HIS HARNESS. THE SKY BELOW WAS DOTTED WITH DRIFTING MEN . . .
A PICNIC, THE GENERAL SAID . . . I MIGHT HAVE KNOWN . . . THE ENGLISH ARE ALL MAD . . . MAMMA MIA!

SIX THOUSAND FEET BELOW, ON A FOREST ROAD NEAR LARINO, TWO TRUCKS AND A STAFF CAR OF THE GERMAN SIXTH PANZER DIVISION SCREECHED TO A HALT. THE HARSH VOICE BELONGED TO MAJOR KURT BERG . .
HERR MAJOR! BRITISH PARATROOPS!
I DID NOT THINK THEY WERE MUSHROOMS, FOOL! WE WILL CUT THROUGH THE WOODS, MEN! IT IS THE VILLA BARRANO AND ITS SECRETS THE ENGLISH ARE AFTER!


MAJOR BERG WAS A SHREWD SOLDIER. WHEN CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY HIT THE LANDING ZONE THREE MINUTES LATER, THE SAME NAME WAS ON HIS LIPS . . . . . .
SEEN THAT POPPOLI CHAP, SERGEANT? HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE GUIDING US TO THE VILLA BARRANO WHEN I'VE EXPLAINED THINGS TO HIM!
HE'S NOT WITH US, CAPTAIN . . . BUT THERE'S A 'CHUTE DRIFTING OVER THERE, TO THE WEST . . .

THE PARACHUTE DRIFTING TO THE WEST WAS PRIVATE POPPOLI'S. A FLUKE OF WIND HAD CARRIED HIM AWAY FROM THE LANDING ZONE. THE TREES WERE SWINGING UP TO MEET HIM WITH ALARMING SPEED . . .
IF THIS IS PEACE, GIVE ME WAR ANY DAY . . . HELP . . .

THE BRANCHES OF A TALL PINE SNARED THE CHUTE-RISERS OF THE LITTLE ITALIAN. HE HAD CLOSED HIS EYES AS THE TREES RUSHED UP TO MEET HIM. THE JOLT KNOCKED ALL THE WIND OUT OF HIM . . .
OOOFFF . . .


HALF A MILE TO THE EAST, CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY LED HIS MEN INTO THE TREES. FOR THOSE VETERANS OF THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE, A DROP OVER ENEMY TERRITORY WAS ROUTINE . . .
HURRY IT UP, MEN! WE'VE GOT TO FIND THAT ITALIAN BEFORE THE JERRIES DO! THERE ARE SOME PAPERS IN THE VILLA BARRANO THAT THE GENERAL WANTS AND POPPOLI'S THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN GUIDE US THERE!

HALF A MILE TO THE WEST, MAJOR KURT BERG, TOO, LED HIS MEN INTO THE TREES. FOR THESE VETERAN PANZER TROOPS, THE REPULSE OF AN ENEMY LANDING FROM THE AIR WAS ALSO ROUTINE . . .
SCHNELL! SCHNELL! THE ENGLISH MUST NOT REACH THE VILLA BEFORE THE HERR GENERAL HAS INSPECTED THOSE PAPERS!

Chapter 5. The PICNIC

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CLEARING, SERGEANT LOGG EASED HIS CRAMPED TRIGGER FINGER AND LOOKED UPWARDS.
CAPTAIN.. LOOK... UP THERE!
WELL, WELL... PRIVATE POPPOLI! SERGEANT, I THINK IT'S TIME YOU TOOK A SECTION AND WORKED ROUND THE BACK OF THOSE JERRIES... WE'VE GOT TO GRAB THAT LITTLE MAN BEFORE THEY DO!
A VITAL MILITARY TARGET NOW, PRIVATE POPPOLI SWUNG MISERABLY IN THE BREEZE OF THE BULLETS . . .
HELP!

IT WAS SERGEANT LOGG'S FLANKING MOVEMENT WHICH BROKE THE DEADLOCK. THREATENED ON TWO SIDES, MAJOR BERG GAVE A HARSH ORDER.
ON THE FLANK, CAPTAIN!
COME ON, MEN... ONE OF YOU GET POOR OLD POPPOL! DOWN...
RETREAT!

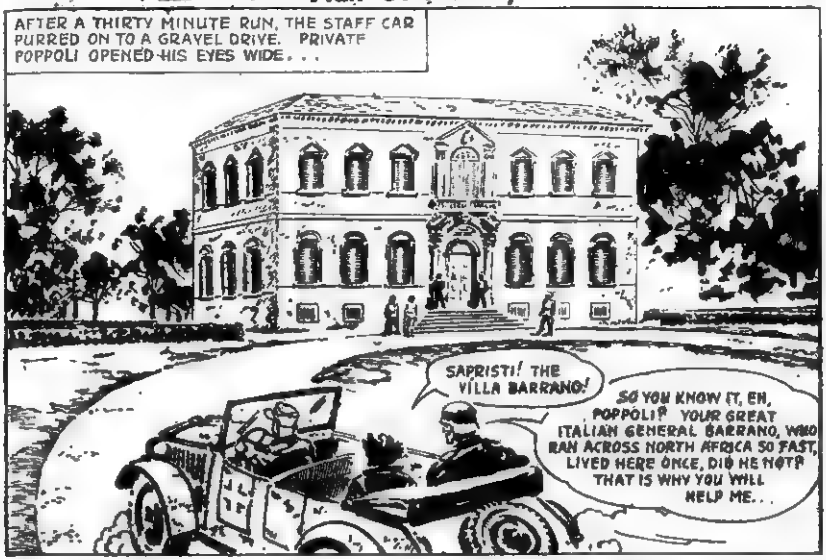
LUCKILY FOR MAJOR BERG, FRESH TROOPS HAD ALREADY HURRIED TOWARDS THE SOUND OF THE FIRING. THEY INCLUDED A MORTAR CREW.
GOOD! SET UP YOUR MORTAR. HERE... RANGE TWO HUNDRED... RAPID FIRE! NOW WE WILL FLUSH OUT THE CURSED ENGLANDERS!

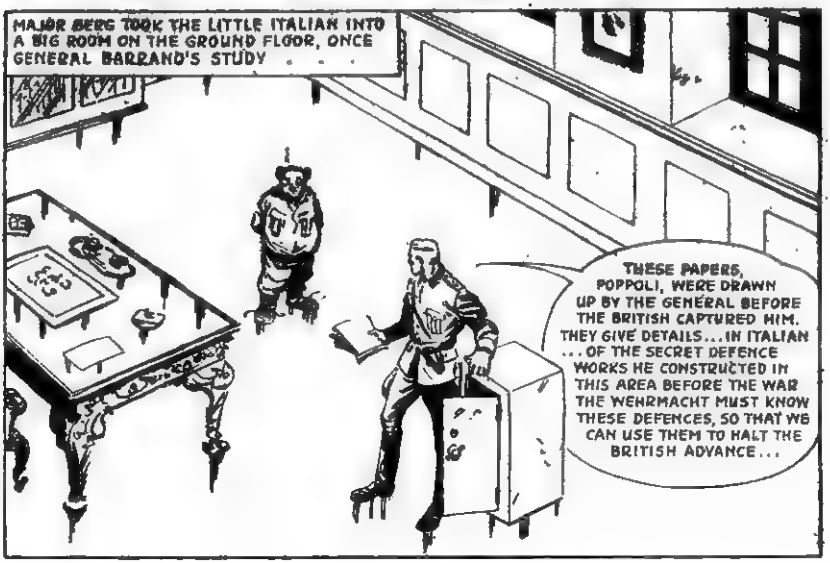
THE FIRST MORTAR BOMB EXPLODED AT THE FOOT OF THE PINE TREE. CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY WAS A DARING SOLDIER, BUT NOT A FOOLHARDY ONE . . .
HECK . . . JERRY'S STONKING US WITH A MORTAR NOW, SIR!
HELP!
WE'LL BE CUT TO RIBBONS IN THESE TREES! GET TO COVER!

THE SECOND MORTAR BOMB FOLLOWED A HIGHER TRAJECTORY AND BURST AGAINST THE BRANCH WHICH SUPPORTED PRIVATE POPPOLI . . .
OWWW!

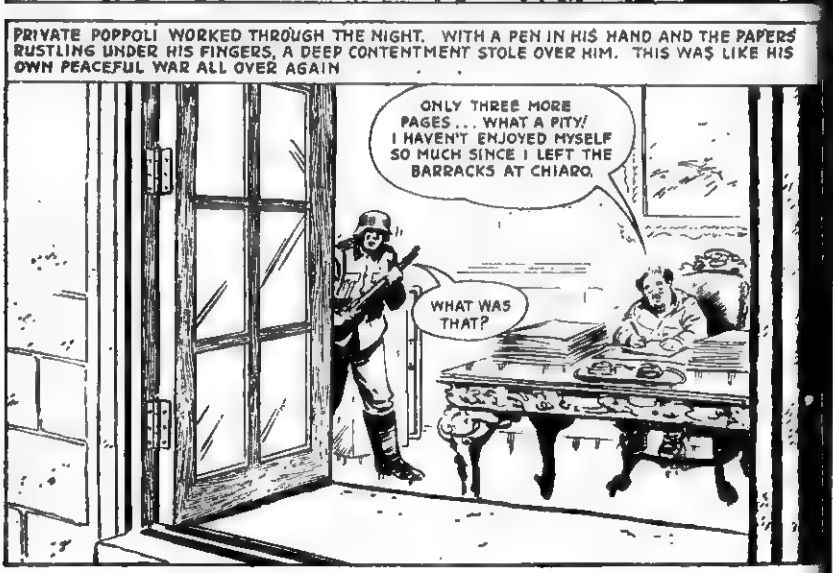
SO PRIVATE POPPOLI FELL INTO THE HANDS OF THE GERMANS, LITERALLY, A SECOND TIME . . .
MAMMA MIA!
AHA . . . MY LITTLE ITALIAN!
THE SMOOTH VOICE OF MAJOR BERG GRATED IN PRIVATE POPPOLI'S BUZZING EARS.
YOU SEEMED EAGER TO REJOIN YOUR GERMAN COMRADES, POPPOLI! COME! I HAVE WORK FOR YOU TO DO!
NO, GENERAL, NO . . . I'M NOT EAGER TO JOIN ANYONE! I DON'T WANT TO WORK . . . I WANT TO GO HOME . . .

MAJOR BERG WAS IN A HURRY. LEAVING HALF HIS MEN TO HUNT DOWN THE BRITISH RAIDERS, HE HUSTLED POPPOLI INTO THE STAFF CAR . . . .
BACK TO THE VILLA, DRIVER, FAST! DON'T WRIGGLE, POPPOLI . . . I AM TAKING YOU NORTHWARDS IN THE DIRECTION OF YOUR HOME, AM I NOT?
SI, GENERAL . . . I'VE HEARD THAT ONE BEFORE . . . AND ALL I DO IS LAND IN THE SOUP.
THE TRUCK AND THE STAFF CAR GATHERED SPEED. FROM THE TREES WHICH BORDERED THE ROAD, SHARP EYES WATCHED THEM. . .
SHALL I SPRAY THEIR TYRES, CAPTAIN?
NO FEAR, SERGEANT . . . NO SHOOTING. THOSE TYRES ARE GOING TO BE JOLLY USEFUL TO US, IF YOU FOLLOW ME.


AFTER A THIRTY MINUTE RUN, THE STAFF CAR PURRED ON TO A GRAVEL DRIVE. PRIVATE POPPOLI OPENED HIS EYES WIDE. . .
SAPRISTI! THE VILLA BARRANO!
SO YOU KNOW IT, EH, POPPOLI? YOUR GREAT ITALIAN GENERAL BARRANO, WHO RAN ACROSS NORTH AFRICA SO FAST, LIVED HERE ONCE, DID HE NOT? THAT IS WHY YOU WILL HELP ME. . .


MAJOR BERG TOOK THE LITTLE ITALIAN INTO A BIG ROOM ON THE GROUND FLOOR, ONCE GENERAL BARRANO'S STUDY . . .
THESE PAPERS, POPPOLI, WERE DRAWN UP BY THE GENERAL BEFORE THE BRITISH CAPTURED HIM. THEY GIVE DETAILS...IN ITALIAN ...OF THE SECRET DEFENCE WORKS HE CONSTRUCTED IN THIS AREA BEFORE THE WAR THE WEHRMACHT MUST KNOW THESE DEFENCES, SO THAT WE CAN USE THEM TO HALT THE BRITISH ADVANCE...

PRIVATE POPPOLI SHUFFLED THE PAPERS TOGETHER WITH THE NEAT HANDS OF A BORN CLERK . . .
THE HERR GENERAL VISITS THE VILLA TO INSPECT THE PAPERS TOMORROW, POPPOLI. THANKS TO YOU, I SHALL HAVE A FULL TRANSLATION READY FOR HIM WHEN HE ARRIVES. JA?
I SEE, GENERAL... A TRANSLATION... I SUPPOSE THAT'S BETTER THAN JUMPING OUT OF AEROPLANES...


PRIVATE POPPOLI WORKED THROUGH THE NIGHT. WITH A PEN IN HIS HAND AND THE PAPERS RUSTLING UNDER HIS FINGERS, A DEEP CONTENTMENT STOLE OVER HIM. THIS WAS LIKE HIS OWN PEACEFUL WAR ALL OVER AGAIN . . .
ONLY THREE MORE PAGES... WHAT A PITY! I HAVEN'T ENJOYED MYSELF SO MUCH SINCE I LEFT THE BARRACKS AT CHIARO.
WHAT WAS THAT?

A HAND SWUNG UP ABOVE THE SILL OF THE OPEN WINDOW. THE GRENADE LANDED WITH A HEART-STOPPING THUMP ON THE PAPERS IN FRONT OF PRIVATE POPPOLI.
U-U-ULP!
PRIVATE POPPOLI JUST GOGGLED AT THE GRENADE. IT WAS THE GERMAN GUARD WHO SWIPED IT OFF THE DESK. FOR A GERMAN, HE THOUGHT QUICKLY . . .
THE PAPERS INTO THE SAFE! SCHNELL!
SI . . . SI . . .

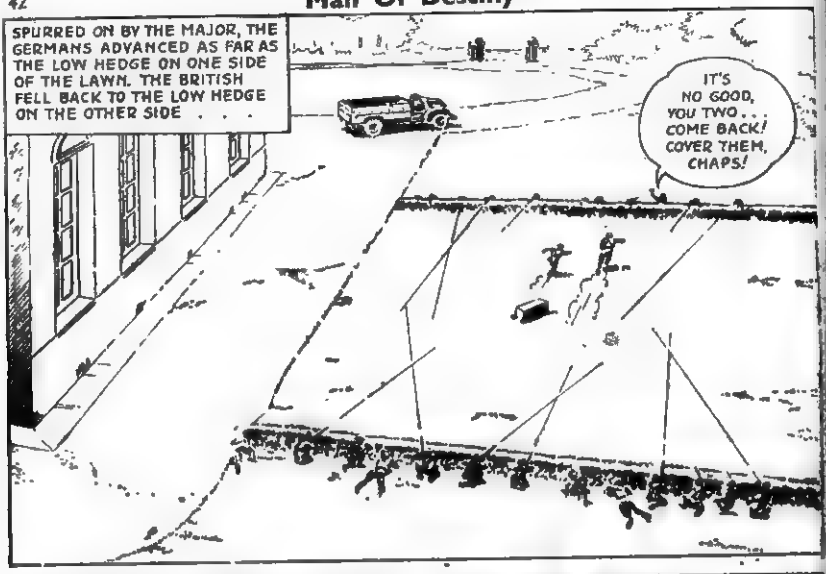
ON SHAKY LEGS, PRIVATE POPPOLI SCUTTLED ACROSS TO THE METAL SAFE. HE BUNDLED AN ARMFUL OF PAPERS INSIDE. THE GERMAN BROUGHT THE REST . . .
MAMMA MIA! I KNEW IT WAS TOO PEACEFUL!
SUDDENLY, THE GRENADE WENT OFF WITH A DEAFENING ROAR. PRIVATE POPPOLI JOINED THE PAPERS IN THE METAL SAFE . . .
owww!

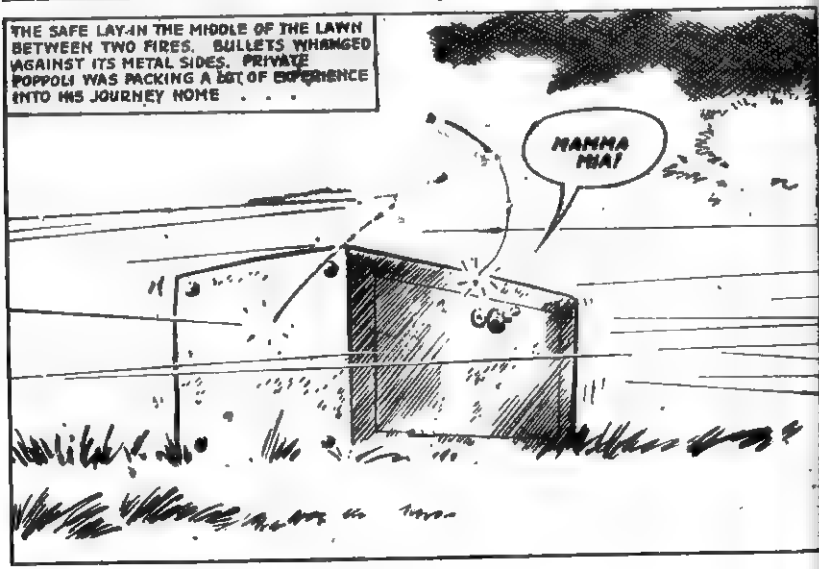
THE WINDOW DARKENED SUDDENLY. THE GERMAN WHIPPED ROUND, SLAMMING THE DOOR OF THE SAFE ON PRIVATE POPPOLI. HIS RIFLE BARKED . . .
ENGLANDER! SCHWEIN!

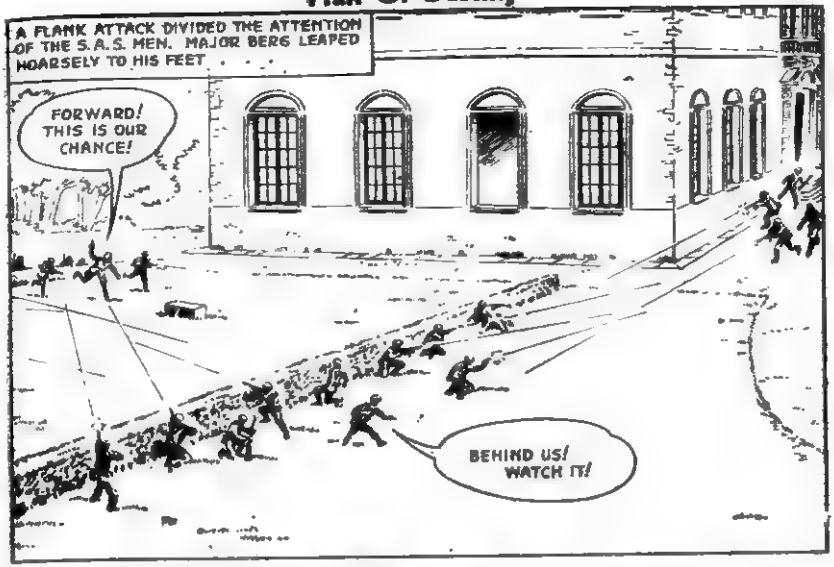
THE TYRE MARKS OF MAJOR BERG'S STAFF CAR HAD LED CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY AND HIS MEN TO THE VILLA BARRANO. THEY HAD WAITED UNTIL DAWN, SPYING OUT THE LAND. . .
OKAY, MEN . . . THAT'S THE SAFE ALL RIGHT . . . GET IT!

PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS RESUMING HIS UNCOMFORTABLE JOURNEY HOME . . .
COR . . . IT WEIGHS A TON! ARE YOU SURE THERE ARE ONLY PAPERS IN IT, SARGE?
HURRY IT UP THERE, LADS! OUT OF THE WINDOW WITH IT . . . WE'LL OPEN IT UP IN THE FOREST.
THE SAFE WAS MANHANDLED ON TO THE WINDOW SILL . . . JUST AS A GROUP OF GERMAN PANZER TROOPS APPEARED ROUND THE CORNER OF THE HOUSE . . .
CHUCK THE THING OUT, MEN . . . THERE'S NOTHING IN IT THAT'LL BREAK!
HERE THEY COME, SIR!
HOLD THEM, CHAPS . . . WE'VE GOT TO GET THOSE PAPERS BACK TO OUR INTELLIGENCE BOYS.

THE SAFE HIT THE GROUND WITH A BONE-SHAKING THUD. THE MUFFLED SOUND WHICH CAME FROM INSIDE IT WAS DROWNED BY THE HAMMERING TOMMY GUNS . . .
MAJOR BERG JOINED HIS MEN, AS THE TWO BRITISH SOLDIERS WERE STAGGERING ACROSS THE LAWN WITH THE SAFE. HE HOWLED WITH RAGE . . .
YOU LET THE ENGLANDER MADMEN STEAL MY PAPERS FROM UNDER MY NOSE. WIPE THEM OUT, YOU FOOLS!


SPURRED ON BY THE MAJOR, THE GERMANS ADVANCED AS FAR AS THE LOW HEDGE ON ONE SIDE OF THE LAWN. THE BRITISH FELL BACK TO THE LOW HEDGE ON THE OTHER SIDE . . .
IT'S NO GOOD, YOU TWO . . . COME BACK! COVER THEM, CHAPS!

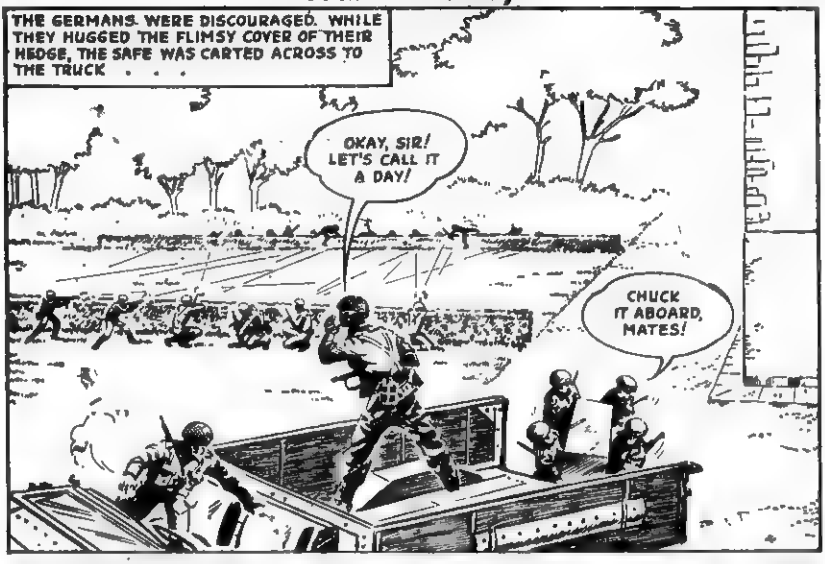

THE SAFE LAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LAWN BETWEEN TWO FIRES. BULLETS WHANGED AGAINST ITS METAL SIDES. PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS PACKING A LOT OF EXPERIENCE INTO HIS JOURNEY HOME . . .
MAMMA MIA!


A FLANK ATTACK DIVIDED THE ATTENTION OF THE S.A.S. MEN. MAJOR BERG LEAPED HOARSELY TO HIS FEET . . .
FORWARD! THIS IS OUR CHANCE!
BEHIND US! WATCH IT!

THE GERMANS HAD REACHED THE SAFE BY THE TIME SERGEANT LOGG'S SECTION HAD DEALT WITH THE FLANK ATTACK. CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY RALLIED HIS MEN . . .
DON'T LET THEM GET AWAY WITH IT, CHAPS . . . FOLLOW ME!
O-OOUF!

THE GERMANS FELL BACK BEFORE THE FRESH HAIL OF LEAD. THE SAFE DROPPED WITH A CLANG AGAIN . . .
TALLY-HO, CHAPS!
ACH, THE MAD ENGLANDER!

THIS TIME, THE S.A.S. MEN TOOK A FIRM GRIP ON THE SAFE. IT NEEDED FOUR MEN TO CARRY IT, BUT THEY GOT IT TO THEIR SIDE OF THE LAWN. SERGEANT LOGG SHOUTED EAGERLY . . .
SIR . . . THERE'S A TRUCK PARKED ON THE DRIVE BEHIND US!
THE VERY THING, SERGEANT . . . CARRY ON WHILE I DISCOURAGE THE JERRIES.


THE GERMANS WERE DISCOURAGED. WHILE THEY HUGGED THE FLIMSY COVER OF THEIR HEDGE, THE SAFE WAS CARTED ACROSS TO THE TRUCK . . .
OKAY, SIR! LET'S CALL IT A DAY!
CHUCK IT ABOARD, MATES!

THE SAFE DROPPED WITH A CLANG IN THE BACK OF THE TRUCK. THE S.A.S. MEN FOLLOWED IT AS THE ENGINE COUGHED AND ROARED.
JOLLY GOOD SHOW, CHAPS!
COR! I HOPE WHATEVER'S IN THIS BLINKING SAFE IS WORTH ALL THE SWEAT WE'VE PUT INTO GETTING IT!

THE TRUCK LEAPED FORWARD. IT SHAVED A SLEEK GERMAN STAFF CAR ON ITS FURIOUS JOURNEY DOWN THE DRIVE. MAJOR BERG LOOKED AT THAT STAFF CAR AND GROANED.

ABOVE THE LAST HECTIC CLATTER OF A TOMMY GUN, AS THE TRUCK LURCHED OUT THROUGH THE GATES OF THE VILLA BARRANO, CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY SIGHED . . .

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, THE TRUCK WAS WELL CLEAR OF PURSUIT IN THE SILENT FOREST . . . .
WELL, WE GOT THE PAPERS, CAPTAIN...THE R.A.F BOYS WILL BE ABLE TO PLASTER THOSE SECRET DEFENCES BEFORE THE JERRIES CAN FIND AND USE THEM.
TOO TRUE, SERGEANT! WE MIGHT AS WELL OPEN UP THE SAFE NOW. NO NEED TO CART IT AROUND WITH US ...WE ONLY WANT WHAT'S INSIDE.

THEY OPENED THE SAFE. THE LITTLE MAN INSIDE IT SAID JUST SIX WORDS, BUT THEY CAME FROM THE BOTTOM OF HIS HEART . . .
SAS
PLEASE CAN I GO HOME NOW?
SAS

THEY PRISED POPPOLI OUT OF THE SAFE. THEY BRUSHED HIM DOWN AND GAVE HIM A CIGARETTE. CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY SHOOK HIS HEAD SYMPATHETICALLY . . .
WE KNOW HOW YOU FEEL, POPPOLI OLD CHAP. . . IT'S ROTTEN LUCK! BUT THERE'S A JERRY ARMY BETWEEN YOU AND CASTELMONTE AND WE'LL HAVE TO CLEAR IT OUT OF THE WAY FIRST . . . YOU JUST STICK AROUND WITH US AND WE'LL GET YOU HOME,
SI, GENERAL . . . I SUPPOSE YOU'RE RIGHT . . . BUT I WISH YOU'D HURRY UP AND FINISH YOUR WAR . . .

THE STOLEN TRUCK ROARED ON TOWARDS THE BRITISH LINES. THE SUN WAS BRIGHT FOR QUITE A LONG WHILE, PRIVATE POPPOLI FELT ALMOST PEACEFUL.
COR . . . THE LITTLE GEEZER'S A GLUTTON FOR PUNISHMENT, ISN'T HE?
YEAH . . . BUT HE LOOKS PRETTY PEACEFUL NOW!
NO, NO! DO NOT SAY THAT! SOMETHING IS SURE TO HAPPEN!

SOMETHING HAPPENED. THE TRUCK HAD REACHED THE GERMAN FRONT LINE. IT PUNCHED THROUGH AT TOP SPEED UNDER A HAIL OF LEAD . . .
IN THE BACK OF THE TRUCK, PRIVATE ROPPOLI TUCKED HIS HEAD DOWN BETWEEN HIS SHOULDERS AND SIGHED DEEPLY . . .
THERE! WHAT DID I SAY? MAMMA MIA!

Chapter 4. HOME, SWEET HOME!

SIX MONTHS LATER, THE BULLETS WERE STILL WHINING ABOVE PRIVATE POPPOLI'S HEAD. IT WAS MAY, 1944, AND THE BATTLEFIELD HAD SHIFTED NORTHWARD TO THE ABRUZZI, BUT THE BULLETS WERE JUST AS NOISY . . .

ALL WINTER, THE LITTLE ITALIAN HAD WAITED IMPATIENTLY, SEPARATED FROM HIS HOME TOWN OF CASTELMONTE ONLY BY SIXTY MILES AND A HEDGE OF GERMAN STEEL. THEN, THE EIGHTH ARMY HAD LUNGED FORWARD AGAIN . . .

BUT IT WAS NOT A MIRAGE THAT PRIVATE POPPOLI SAW ON THAT MORNING IN MAY. IT WAS A SIGNPOST . . .

STRAY BULLETS STILL SANG OVER THE LITTLE ITALIAN'S HEAD. HE IGNORED THEM NOW. AFTER EIGHT HARROWING MONTHS AND THREE HUNDRED TERRIBLE MILES, PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS NEARING HOME . . .
I'LL WALK, THAT'S WHAT I'LL DO . . . I CAN'T WAIT WHILE THE GENERAL HAS HIS LARK .
HQ

CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY AND HIS SPECIAL AIR SERVICE UNIT WERE ACTING AS ADVANCED INFANTRY AGAIN. THEY CLEARED OUT THE GERMAN SPANDAU NEST WITHOUT MUCH DIFFICULTY. WHEN THEY GOT BACK TO THE ROAD AGAIN . . .
LUMME, SIR! LOOK!
POPPOLI! WELL, I'M BLOWED! YOU'VE GOT TO GIVE THE LITTLE CHAP MARKS FOR TRYING! COME ON . . .

THE JEEP CAUGHT UP WITH PRIVATE POPPOLI TWO HUNDRED YARDS ALONG THE ROAD. HE LOOKED UP, BUT HE DID NOT STOP WALKING...
POPPOLI, OLD CHAP, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
HOME, GENERAL ... CASTELMONTE, TEN KILOMETROS...
THE SMILE UNDER CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY'S MOUSTACHE WAS A KINDLY ONE . . .
GOOD FOR YOU, OLD CHAP! I SUPPOSE I CAN'T PERSUADE YOU TO STAY WITH US AND HAVE SOME FUN . . . NO? I THOUGHT NOT! BUT YOU MIGHT AS WELL HOP ABOARD . . . WE'LL MAKE A DETOUR AND RUN YOU UP TO YOUR OLD HOME TOWN.
GRAZIE, GENERAL, GRAZIE!
PRIVATE POPPOLI STOOD UP EXCITEDLY IN THE JEEP AS IT CLIMBED THE ROAD TO THE LITTLE TOWN . . .
THINK OF THOSE MARRIAGE LICENCES WAITING FOR ME, GENERAL . . . AND THOSE BIRTH CERTIFICATES. WON'T THEY BE GLAD TO SEE ME IN CASTELMONTE!

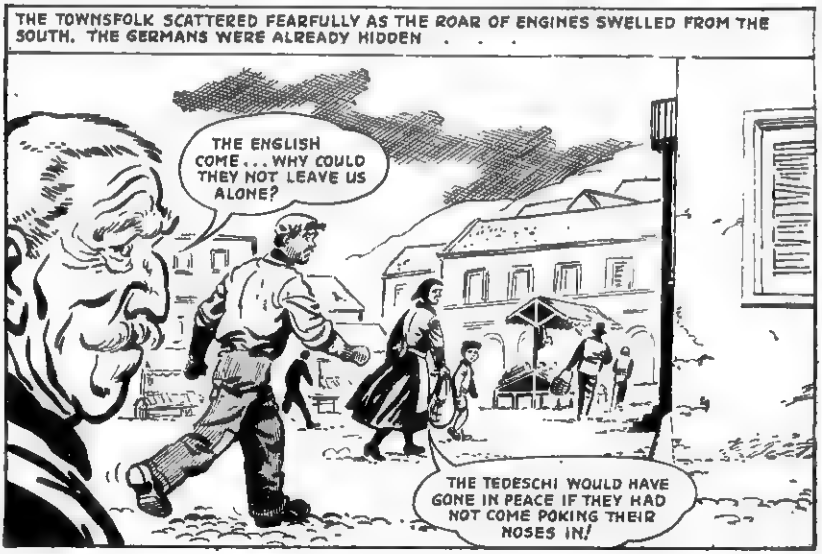
IT WAS MARKET DAY IN CASTELMONTE, BUT BUSINESS WAS SLACK. ONE REASON FOR THIS WAS THE PRESENCE OF THREE LARGE ARMY TRUCKS AND A STAFF CAR IN THE MARKET SQUARE.
GET ABOARD THE TRUCKS . . . SCHNELL!
YOU HEAR, MEN . . . THE OBERLEUTNANT IS IN A HURRY.

THE TRUCKS AND THE STAFF CAR BELONGED TO THE WEHRMACHT. THE HARSH VOICE OF THE OFFICER BELONGED TO OBERLEUTNANT KURT BERG . . .
WE WILL LEAVE THE TOWN IMMEDIATELY, CORPORAL. THE HERR GENERAL IS FORMING A NEW DEFENSIVE LINE TO THE NORTH. FOLLOW MY CAR!
JAWOHL, HERR OBERLEUTNANT!

THE BURLY GERMAN HAD BEEN REDUCED IN RANK AFTER THE AFFAIR AT THE VILLA BARRANO. IT HAD NOT IMPROVED HIS TEMPER. THE PEOPLE OF CASTELMONTE HEARD HIS ANNOUNCEMENT WITH DELIGHT.
MIRACOLOSO! YOU HEAR ... THE TEDESCHI ARE LEAVING CASTELMONTE! THERE WILL BE NO FIGHTING HERE!
CAFE
HERR OBERLEUTNANT ... WAIT!

A GERMAN SOLDIER HAD BEEN POSTED AS A LOOKOUT AT THE SOUTHERN END OF THE TOWN ...
THE ENGLANDERS, HERR OBERLEUTNANT ... MANY JEEPS! UP THE HILL FROM THE SOUTH THEY COME, TOWARDS CASTELMONTE.
SO ...

OBERLEUTNANT BERG SMILED HARSHLY. HE HAD AN OLD SCORE TO SETTLE WITH THE BRITISH, AND HE LIKED AMBUSHES . . .
WE WILL STAY A LITTLE, MEN . . . LONG ENOUGH TO WELCOME THE ENGLANDERS! HIDE THE TRUCKS ROUND THE CORNER! SAFETY CATCHES OFF! RAPID FIRE WHEN I GIVE THE WORD!
DOLOROSO . . . CASTELMONTE WILL BE A BATTLEFIELD!


THE TOWNSFOLK SCATTERED FEARFULLY AS THE ROAR OF ENGINES SWELLED FROM THE SOUTH. THE GERMANS WERE ALREADY HIDDEN . . .
THE ENGLISH COME . . . WHY COULD THEY NOT LEAVE US ALONE?
THE TEDESCHI WOULD HAVE GONE IN PEACE IF THEY HAD NOT COME POKING THEIR NOSES IN!

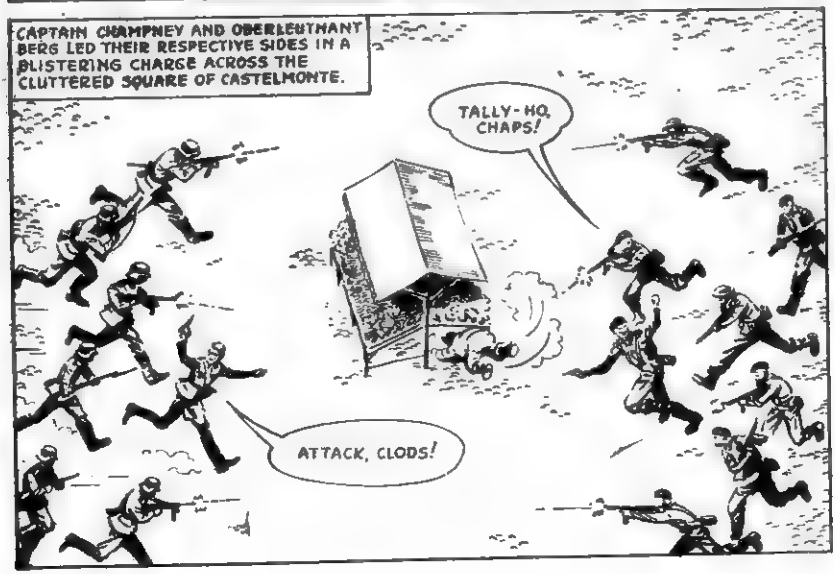
IT WAS A DESERTED CASTELMONTE WHICH PRIVATE POPPOLI RETURNED TO IN TRIUMPH AFTER HIS SERVICE IN THE WARS.
ATTENZIONE, AMICOS! WHERE ARE YOU? IT IS I, POPPOLI! YOUR TOWN CLERK IS BACK TO PUT YOUR AFFAIRS IN ORDER!

THE JEEPS PULLED UP IN THE DESERTED SQUARE. PRIVATE POPPOLI CLIMBED DOWN. HE STOOD STILL FOR A LONG HAPPY MOMENT. HIS JOURNEY WAS OVER . . .
AH . . . THIS IS CASTELMONTE, GENERAL! LISTEN TO THE SILENCE . . . THE QUIETNESS . . . THE PEACEFULNESS!

IT WAS THEN THAT OBERLEUTNANT KURT BERG SPRANG HIS TRAP . . . AND THE MARKET SQUARE OF CASTELMONTE EXPLODED IN PRIVATE POPPOLI'S FACE.
MAMMA MIA!

CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY REACTED SWIFTLY AND AGGRESSIVELY TO THE GERMAN CHALLENGE . . .
OUR LUCK'S IN, CHAPS . . . JERRIES . . . GIVE THEM SOCKS!

PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD TURNED AWAY FROM THE GERMAN ONSLAUGHT. HE WAS JUST IN TIME TO FACE THE FIRST WITHERING BURST OF BRITISH FIRE . . .
OH, NOT AGAIN!


CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY AND OBERLEUTNANT BERG LED THEIR RESPECTIVE SIDES IN A BLISTERING CHARGE ACROSS THE CLUTTERED SQUARE OF CASTELMONTE.
TALLY-HO, CHAPS!
ATTACK, CLODS!

UNDER THE VEGETABLE STALL, PRIVATE POPPOLI HUGGED THE SHUDDERING COBBLES OF PEACEFUL CASTELMONTE
OHHH . . .

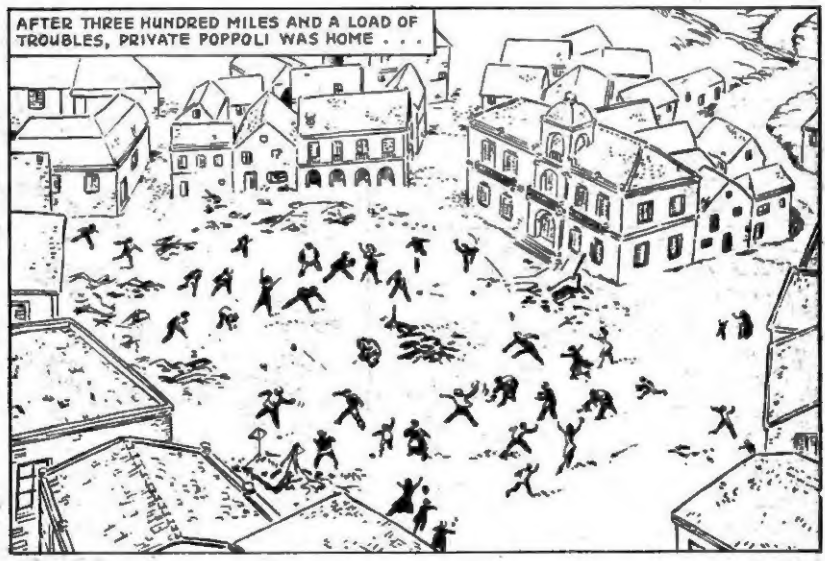
ALL ACROSS THE SQUARE, MEN STRUGGLED AMONGST THE TOPPLING STALLS WITH BULLETS AND RIFLE BUTTS AND FISTS . . .
OOUUFF!
AAAGH . . .

OBERLEUTNANT KURT BERG LIKED FURTIVE AMBUSHES BETTER THAN CRUDE BATTLES. HE PAUSED FOR BREATH NOW, DODGED A BRITISH RIFLE BUTT AND BARKED A HASTY ORDER...
ENOUGH, MEN! WITHDRAW! TO THE TRUCKS!
CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY LOOKED UP REGRETFULLY AS THE GERMANS RAN. THERE WAS SOMETHING DISTASTEFUL TO HIM IN ATTACKING MEN WITH THEIR BACKS TURNED.
HOLD IT, CHAPS! WE'LL CATCH 'EM FASTER IN JEEPS!
PRIVATE POPPOLI EMERGED UNSTEADILY FROM THE WRECK OF THE VEGETABLE STALL IN TIME TO SEE THE LAST OF CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY AND HIS MEN...
SO LONG, POPPOLI OLD CHAP! THANKS FOR THE PARTY!

THE ROARING ENGINES OF THE BELLIGERENTS DIED AWAY IN THE DISTANCE. PEACE RETURNED TO THE MARKET SQUARE OF CASTEL MONTE. PRIVATE POPPOLI STOOD ALONE IN THE MIDST OF THE DESOLATION AND GROANED . . .
CAFE - VINI
OOO.. OH!
THE TOWNSFOLK EMERGED INTO THE DEVASTATED SUNLIGHT . . .
POPPOLI . . . SO IT WAS HIM!
HE HAS NOT COME BACK FROM THE WAR . . . HE HAS BROUGHT IT WITH HIM!
HE WILL PUT OUR AFFAIRS IN ORDER, HE SAYS!

SOME VOICES WERE RAISED IN PRIVATE POPPOLI'S DEFENCE . . .
HE DID NOTHING! IT WAS NOT HIS FAULT!
HE WRECKED CASTELMONTE!
LEAVE HIM ALONE!
CHASE HIM OUT!

THE TOWNSFOLK OF CASTELMONTE WERE UPSET. THEY FELT THE NEED TO RELIEVE THEIR FEELINGS. THERE WAS PLENTY OF AMMUNITION TO HAND . . .
FOOLS!
IMBECILES!
SAPRISTI!
ASSASSINS!



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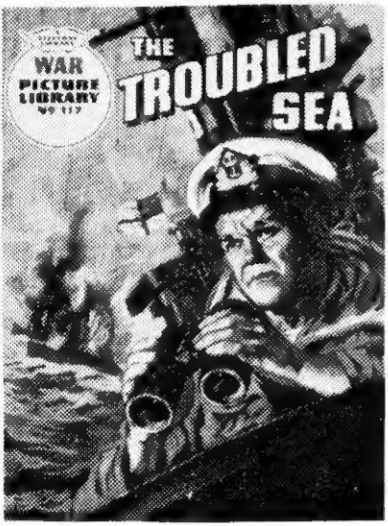
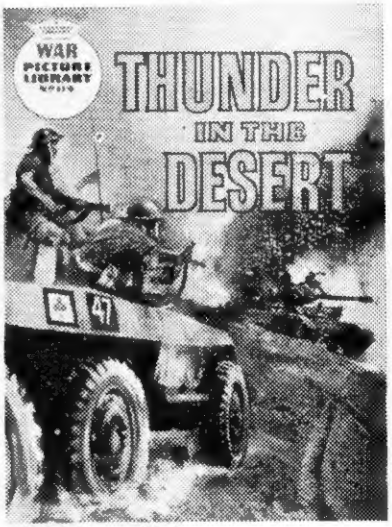


Some men deserve to die—Kapitan Kurt Wolf of U-boat 97 was such a man !

No. 119.—THUNDER IN THE DESERT



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